

Extension gets support

Hamzah yes to reprieve for foreign worker programmes

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KUALA LUMPUR: Employers needing foreign workers and those yet to settle issues relating to repatriating workers can heave a huge sigh of relief as the Home Ministry will support an extension to the two programmes involved.

Home Minister Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainuddin said he would propose to the Cabinet to extend the labour recalibration and repatriation recalibration programmes, adding that he was aware that more time was needed due to the ongoing national lockdown.

The programmes, due to end on June 30, were launched by the government last November to regularise the foreign workforce in the country and to allow those who had overstayed to return to their countries, without the involvement of third parties or agents.

Asked how long the extension would be, Hamzah said this would also depend on the input of the health authorities.

"It could be three or six months. I will bring it up at Cabinet meeting," he said yesterday.

He said the government's purpose in implementing the programmes was to ensure that only foreigners with valid documents were employed in the country.

"No matter what the criticisms are, I will stand by doing what is right for the country.

"If a foreigner wants to work here, he or she must be documented. We will facilitate this ... we do not want anyone hiding in the bushes," he added.

In April, the government agreed to extend the labour recalibration programme to employers in the services sub-sectors involved – restaurants, cargo, wholesale and retail, as well as cleaning and washing.

The agreement was reached in a joint committee meeting chaired by Hamzah and Human Resources Minister Datuk Seri M. Saravanan on the management of foreign workers here.

Hamzah said then that the decision was made to help the government revive the national economy and prevent critical sectors such as construction, manufacturing, plan-



Time to rest: Foreign workers chilling at their 'rumah kongs' near a construction site next to the NKVE highway due to the lockdown. – IZZAFIQ ALIAS/The Star

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Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainuddin

tations and services from suffering huge losses due to a labour shortage.

Prior to that, only employers in 3D (dangerous, difficult and dirty) sectors were allowed to re-employ illegal immigrants as workers from 15 source countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

In an immediate response, Indonesia welcomed the proposal by Hamzah, saying thousands of its workers were "caught" in the lockdown here.

Its ambassador to Malaysia

Hermono said with the first half of June taken up by MCO 3.0 and a lockdown extension confirmed, work to deport more workers could not be done.

"Thousands have lost their jobs and can't pay for food and rent. At least if they can get home, even if no jobs await them, they will have their families," he said.

Hermono said of the 51,000 who registered under the exercise, 44,000 had been sent back to Indonesia with the rest still waiting for their check-out memo from the Immigration Department as they remained at detention centres.

He suggested that the 7,000 remaining workers be allowed to return to Batam or Tanjung Pinang by boat, with Indonesia picking up the tab for Covid-19 tests.

"We are also willing to send some of them back by air and pay for their PCR screening tests," he added.

Hermono estimated that 50,000 more affected workers, mainly from the services and construction sectors, wanted to return home under the exercise.

In the meantime, he said the

embassy was helping out by despatching about 2,000 foodpacks daily to workers who were in need.

Indonesia maintains its largest migrant workforce in Malaysia.

According to the embassy's estimate, some 2.7 million Indonesian workers are here but only 704,000 are said to be documented.

Malaysia is heavily dependent on Indonesian labour, from domestic helpers to construction workers.

On a new labour agreement on the recruitment of domestic workers from his country, Hermono said a meeting of the joint committee set up to study the matter was still pending.

Malaysia and Indonesia first signed the MOU on the Recruitment and Placement of Indonesian Domestic Workers in 2006, which was amended in 2011 to last until 2016.

The agreement, among others, affirmed the right of the workers to hold their passports, communicate with their families, be provided with a weekly rest day, and for their monthly wages to be paid into a bank account.